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DEPLOYED V CORPS AVIATORS PROUD TO HAVE RARE 'FLYING FIRST SERGEANT' ON THEIR TEAM

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FORWARD OPERATING BASE SPEICHER, Iraq — Soldiers in V Corps' 2nd Battalion, 1st Aviation, 1st Infantry Division, proudly consider their first sergeant to be a bit of an oddity. And they like it.



PHOTO COURTESY COMPANY B, 2ND BN., 1ST AVIATION
1st Sgt. Jean P. Thomas of V Corps' Company B, 2nd Battalion, 1st Aviation poses on a flight line in Iraq.

1st Sgt. Jean P. Thomas isn't just the senior enlisted leader of the Company B, 2/1st "Knighthawks" -- he's also a helicopter crew chief. That makes him one of a few -- if not the only -- flying first sergeants in theatre.

"1st Sergeant Thomas is not required to fly.

He volunteers," said Capt. Sam Pemberton, a 2/1st Black Hawk helicopter pilot. "He's even qualified to do ... night flights. That's almost unheard of for a first sergeant."

Thomas says he flies not for fame or glory, but to be a team player.

"I couldn't ask the guys to fly -- to perform dangerous missions, and not do it myself," said Thomas, who calls St. Clair Shores, Mich., home.

With 200-plus hours of flight time under his belt, Thomas has flown with every Soldier in his company. He says it's just one of his ways of getting to know each Soldier.

"When I fly with these guys, I get to see parts of their personalities I may not otherwise get to know just sitting behind a desk," Thomas said.

Thomas' tenure as first sergeant for Bravo Company started two-and-a-half-years ago, but the trek to get there began in 1985.

At the age of 20, Thomas entered basic training to become an infantryman. Four years into his career, he decided to reclassify as an avionics mechanic. Shortly after graduating from that training, Thomas found himself on a flight destined for the Middle East to take part in Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm.

As a staff sergeant in 1992, Thomas became an instructor, teaching auto flight controls and avionics. Four years later he was a platoon sergeant in Egypt, logging flight time on one of the Army's now-out-of-service UH-1H "Huey" helicopters.

In 1999, Thomas completed drill sergeants training at Fort Jackson, S.C. After his "drill" stint he returned to aviation, serving eight months with the 601st Aviation Support Battalion and six months

with Charlie Company, 2nd Battalion, 1st Aviation, before it was inactivated.

Since May 2002, Thomas says he has enjoyed his position with Bravo Company as "their" first sergeant -- as he refers to himself -- not "the" first sergeant.

"This isn't just my company, it's our company," Thomas said.

"He's a good guy ... (who) cares about his troops and overall unit morale and welfare," said Black Hawk pilot Chief Warrant Officer 2 Jake White-Diemand.

"First sergeant is just an upbeat person," said Pemberton. "He's one of the best I've ever known. We're proud of him."

